

# RIVER, OUR RIVER



MJ Stratton

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*River, Our River*

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# River, Our River

by

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i.

I am flea  
I am matted fur

I can't stop my limbs  
curling round

foxes on the margins  
a garden of cinders—

once green

this voice is now

a dust  
of mothers

calling for a child  
like rain

ii.

I want to sleep  
but can't get  
past my body

*lay it down—*

Like grapefruit I wring  
moons into jars  
& drink their juice

Mothlike haunting  
the static asleep  
in corners of the porch

This is my house  
and you may knock  
upon my Dream

but not my door

iii.

I'm drawn to teeth  
I'm drawn to rivers

like light

I'm drawn to jars

★

river teeth  
convince me to fold  
sheeplike in my roundness

brave in my soft

iv.

in the woods of myself  
there's a bad kind of music

these bees in my chest  
with tiny drill guns

wrenches & pliers  
& a cold need to hollow

my bones into flutes  
*If you're one long hole*

they say    *you'll sing*



v.

Have you ever lived  
inside yourself? By a river  
with glass fish, I watched  
my hands turn into men  
hungry & afraid of their hunger.  
What does it mean to have a face?  
Something to hide within the sound  
of so many circles. Circling  
underwater, I've heard of a man  
called White Crow, who catches us  
on his fishing wire, & offers us  
a choice: to swim on hooks in  
shallow water, neat and tidy like  
clothes on a line, or to burst  
the false lining of ourselves. The  
scaled skin. The writhing gill  
& still worm. To walk home,  
perhaps alone, but on solid air.

vi.

bath water on the ceiling  
helixed light, wiggling,

wringing its hands, suspended  
just above our heads,  
it looks like what everything  
is made out of, and so  
it looks like everything.  
is everything.

I could touch it all  
with a broom.

★

Which ledge am I?  
The one we leap from  
or the one we crash into?  
You asked me for a story.  
I can tell you there's a car  
and there's a clown—  
but not which is which.

★

It's said the raven is harbinger  
of death—and so there must be  
another thing. Another body,  
feathered and beaked. Another  
unfurling creature, whose throat  
is a black box, out from which  
pours this scratching song.

Have you seen that video of all the dead frogs in the pool?  
Hundreds of them, swaying like drifters along the ghost of  
the interstate. The night agrees with me; I am haunted in a  
way that's warm. I can't decide, now, whether I relate to the  
little dead frogs, like children, or to the pool, where life came  
to die, or lovers to soak in something like a moon, not once  
suspecting they'd be horribly purpled, deeply drowned.

viii.

pears grow  
plump in the tree

& then fall  
here

with us  
worms

& we feast

so quickly  
complaining

about  
the bruised

eye of  
saturn

we deserve  
sweetness

we say  
& then

we bite

i've made you a sandwich. the bread is storebought but i've cut the crusts off the way i imagine your mother did when she wanted to say i love you. i put it in a plastic, earth-eating bag, trying to keep the rain away. but this was silly of me because of the drought. and i learned i myself am the hole the water travels through. i must be too happy. too sad in a clogged way, when i lose hair it gets in the drain and comes out the faucet, but not to worry, i've picked your sandwich clean like a bird. do you have a bird? someone to talk to? one day a few years ago i got tired of my own voice, and i threw it, like a ball. i've left part of me in the road. i still look for it. and hide from it. and i wonder about what it is i really want. what do you want? in your mouth. are you hungry? i've made you a sandwich. the bread is squished, i'm afraid, i held it too tightly to my chest. or the wind got it as i ran. or i tripped and fell and rolled like the ball i lost, down the hill you live beside, and it bruised along with me. but this is what i have. all this, in a bag, with no crust. and it could be yours. if only you'd let me know its good enough. that like me you're hungry. that you want it. however it is. however you can.

The fire-eater was so grand, the world made names for his mouth. Furnace & Star Eater. Pizza Oven. & The Crow That Bit the Sun, Then Spit it Out as an Egg. The latter was rarely used, given its length and the world's penchant for saving time while simultaneously squandering it. But he grew tired of the lightning bugs in his colon & the black sheep of his tongue, coated in a char so thick it resembled wool. I don't like eating fire, said the fire-eater. I'm not full, but I'll eat nothing now. At this, the world raged and squawked. They didn't understand, and a lack of understanding is worse than rats when it comes to breeding. Multiplying by the billions in less than three horny years, and then forming a density so grand it had its own mouth. *I don't have a mouth*, said the shadow—and the fire-eater, from a gaping fissure very much like a mouth, said, *My name may be Justice, but my face is Decay*. And while I'd like to continue as your trusty narrator (it's my job, after all), I don't do jobs well. Besides, you know the ending by now. We are both in this world, after all. Shoulder to shoulder, we were both there in the crowd.

And who would have thought I had a voice  
or that I'd use it—pull silk from breathing  
wounds. For years, I was the fish  
on your table. Silently and reliably  
swimming. I broke my own ribs  
into toothpicks and cleaned your words  
from my mouth. Like dirt, you miss my  
silence, have its worn photo in your wallet.  
And like dust, I miss the time I've lost to rain.  
But I'm dry now. And I can burn everything,  
all of it, down. With just one fish tank rock  
and bone.

You were made from stars, now prove it.  
Divide and then divide again. One third  
of the heap goes to the doctors to pay for health.  
The other, to the market, for meat unlike ourselves,  
so cold in its stillness, and the other other stumbles  
to the quarry, off to beat its hands in the water  
and call it work. You can't be whole here,  
but you can rage about it. Ache your chest.  
Fall on sticks and say you didn't see them.  
You can make yourself into a drum, right in  
the heart of it all. You didn't see anything  
on your long fall here—but you felt everything.  
And in your own bleariness, you learned  
to unlearn the gospel, and write your own  
feral version that feels like spring. Warm on  
your cheek, and in your blemished hand.



xiii.

Wind is trying to get inside.  
I've locked the door. I hear it  
pleading. Saying it's sorry,  
that he made a mistake. He  
didn't mean to get cold. Or  
lift her dress up. Or find the  
tree in my yard with the hanging  
swing and knock it down.  
Come on, baby. Haven't you  
ever been mean before? Let  
me touch your hair. I hear a  
storm coming. Just let me in.

Margo had never jumped from a twelve story, but she had dropped an egg from around waist-high, and she imagined the process wasn't much different. The crack. The desire to look. The reluctance to touch the seeping slop of what was, and the need to wipe it all away, clean and tidy. The street like a napkin, washed, and pressed, and carefully folded, back into its drawer.

xv.

There's a bench in the park  
where a sweet man in a sweater  
becomes a mother to feed the birds.

And I've tried taking the bench  
home, but strength drips from  
my grip, I am a river, and his peace

remains beneath the tree I'll sometimes  
walk past, feeling uprooted. Feeling unheld  
in knowing I'm also an axe.

xvi.

I'm scared  
everything is  
almost gone,  
and the rest  
is going. I  
betray myself  
every time  
I feel my tongue  
and swallow it.  
Every time I  
break a pipe  
and make use  
of bone. And yes  
the bear trap  
took the leg  
but I walked  
towards it first.  
Then hopped.  
Then crawled.  
River-dragged  
and feather-lulled  
by the sight of  
a mouth.

xvii.

i've never been alone with october  
but i imagine it happening within a friend  
of a friend's home, the soft, catchable  
void of their coat closet, a full moon,  
a crumbling of hands, and then the start  
of the whole world, crisp as the orchard  
apple we trod on to get to the worm

xviii.

when i miss my mother's sweater  
i draw eyes on clay pigeons  
so what shatters has a face

i can understand  
why the moon man prefers  
the edge of us over the center  
as gooey as it is cruel

i belly crawl through the long grass  
to meet a snake i can curl  
into & this is how i sleep

how do you?

xix.

I was born to cinders.  
When I came home,  
the house was gone.

My limbs hardened  
into tables & I thought  
I must carry what was left

& hold it up. In a dream,  
you came & peeled me  
from the furniture &

we dragged it to the river  
where we ate in the long grass,  
surrounded by singing frogs.

As a table, I was hungry.  
& *what are you now?* you ask me  
& you hold my hand

& I tell you, feeling just like the river,

our river,

*I am full.*





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In poem x, the phrase “divide // and then divide again” is borrowed from a poem by Ada Limón.

MJ Stratton is from Providence, RI. Her work has appeared in *Blue*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and *Prometheus Dreaming*. You can read more about her and her work at [mj-stratton.com](http://mj-stratton.com).